Contemporary Poetry and Capitalism

Walt Hunter*

Someone thinking about contemporary US poetry and capitalism might start with a few of the following questions. Why turn to poetry to think about capitalism? Poems exist at some distance from the dynamics of production and circulation that define the global capitalist economy—in a way that visual art, for instance, does not. What particular knowledge does poetry provide about capitalism that could not be gleaned from social theory or other aesthetic forms? The large canvas of the novel has been important for anatomizing changes in historical capitalism, but poetry, at least the shorter, nonnarrative forms, does not have that kind of time and space. Are historical forms and genres of poetry symptoms of moments in capitalism, intricate products of the availability of leisure time or of the demand to find advertising jingles? If so, the gulf between an element of a poem, such as rhyme or syntax, and an element of an economic system feels intimidatingly vast. It is difficult and often unconvincing to explain the artifice of poetry as either a passive reflection or an active reconfiguration of the world.

One response is to pluralize what “poetry” refers to, looking at vernacular forms and performances, direct interventions at local sites of protest and occupation. Does poetry, in these theaters, have some use in mitigating the destructive social and affective consequences of capitalism? Historical examples of revolutionary uses of poetry might focus on the immediate effects of slogans and chants: contemporary protests from Occupy to Tahrir Square, Ferguson, and Charlottesville have featured this kind of poetry.1 Or does poetry consolidate practices, habits, kinds of behavior that may be said to reproduce ways of living and thinking under capitalism? The obliqueness of style and language, heightened in many varieties of vernacular and performance forms, can provide a boundary against the world of the poem as something not reducible to that world.

*Walt Hunter is Associate Professor of World Literature and Associate Chair of English at Clemson University. He is the author of Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization (Fordham 2019) and the cotranslator, with Lindsay Turner, of Frédéric Neyrat’s Atopias: Manifesto for a Radical Existentialism (2017).
poetry at the expense of plot and person, can be more suited to pleasure, enchantment, and escape than to sabotage, resistance, and disruption. Even those latter terms feel dubious, since they are marshalled as often by corporations as by antisystemic groups.

The questions above are hard to answer without falling into an overweening enthusiasm about the importance of poetry or into chastening reminders of its cultural and political marginality. A certain contemporary chariness about poetry’s efficacy may come from a history of dramatic overstatement common throughout the twentieth century, in which poetry could levitate the Pentagon, directly catalyze revolutionary change, or disrupt habitual patterns of thought and syntax. It may just as well come from a history of deliberate understatement in which the craft and the criticism of poetry represent the disinterested tending of an academic walled garden, largely undertaken by gatekeepers in protected enclaves. Aggrandizement of poetry’s powers, and sobering reminders of its irrelevance, is not confined to specialized North American poetic discourses of the twentieth century, but both have flourished there.

The field of poetry and poetics has been reshaped by a decade and a half of close attention to many of its enduring premises and assumptions. Scholars have launched historical accounts of the idea of lyric, or even of poetry itself, justifiably raising questions of a Western parochialism when it comes to certain claims about how poetry is read. It has been over 10 years since the New Lyric Studies—inaugurated by the work of Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, debated in a 2008 cluster in PMLA, and extended by Gillian White in Lyric Shame (2014)—exhorted poetry scholars to look at the microhistories of genres, attending closely to the moments in which terms such as lyric were consolidated and reading practices institutionalized. Some recent work on poetry has responded by expanding its geographical purview, embracing new comparative methods, and thinking hemispherically, globally, or transnationally. Other work has moved off the poem as the primary object of analysis, looking instead to the institutions, from the state department to the creative writing program to the publishing industry, which affect the production and circulation of poetry. Meanwhile, accounts of late twentieth-century and contemporary poetry have created periodizing narratives in which the cultural turn to postmodernism plays less of an explanatory role than dramatic changes in the global economy and the planetary condition.

Some of the most vibrant searching within poetics has occurred in studies of contemporary poetry and race. Over the last decade, leading accounts of twentieth-century poetry and race have combined close analyses of poetic form, Anglophone and hemispheric US histories of poetry, and rigorous historical or social exegeses:
Anthony Reed, Evie Shockley, Dorothy Wang, and Timothy Yu demonstrate how the pronounced lack of attention to race has produced a reductive history of experimental and avant-garde American poetry. Fred Moten’s theoretical interventions stand out for their examination of institutions like the university and its politicized engagement with the aesthetics of poetry under regimes of racial capitalism. Indigenous poetry of the Americas has received attention by scholars such as Amy De’Ath, So Mayer, and Ananya Mishra. The questions raised by critics and poets writing at the intersection of race, gender, Indigeneity, performance, and aesthetic form indicate future directions where much work still needs to be done.

This thumbnail history and bibliography are meant to be neither exclusive nor exhaustive, but to draw attention to work that is still not that well known within academic discourses about poetry, nor visible at many conferences about poetry. Scholars of poetry who denaturalize and historicize poetic keywords have encouraged fresh genealogies of poets, uncovered histories of international publishing networks, and developed comparative methods. One task for someone writing about late twentieth-century and contemporary poetry is to read as widely as possible in order to develop ever more capacious theories of poetic value. Contemporary poets navigate a heterodox set of vernacular institutions (the festival, social media, the protest) that extend well beyond the survey syllabus, creative writing workshop, annual awards, and the publishing industry. My view is that poetry scholarship has an important role in introducing contemporary poets to readers and explaining how they make sense of their present—both through the baring of personal experience and through the summoning of poetic traditions, subgenres, and rhetorical stances. I offer normative suggestions and exhortations here to illuminate the contributions of the three critical books I discuss below and to underline how poetry criticism has suffered from excessive gatekeeping. The exclusionary canons of poetry are the consequences of what I believe is an unsupportable claim: that the value of a poem can be decided without consideration of the material particularity in which the poet writes.

Perhaps claims about poetry’s ontology and anatomies of discrete movements of American poetry have largely been replaced by curiosity, in the work of US scholars of poetry, about the horizons of poetry’s social and political activity. Part of this has to do with the late, slow turn to acknowledging that poets and poetic compositions cannot be detached from the material backgrounds of race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Another part has to do with the broader necessity for literary scholars, in the second quarter of the twenty-first century, to rethink periodization in a way that makes sense of the catastrophic forces of racial capitalism and climate change, as well
as the rise of far-right leaders across the globe. Whereas previous work on US poetry and capitalism—say, analysis of Leftist poets of the 1930s, or of Language poets of the 1980s—remains within the ambit of a loosely affiliated network of poets, new books about poetry and capitalism are relatively uninterested in parochializing impulses of US poetry, bringing together poets in novel combinations, omnibus chapters, and productive pairings.

Three new books by Margaret Ronda, Jasper Bernes, and Heather Milne attune the history of contemporary US poetry to the rhythms and crises of historical capitalism. Although books about poetry have been slow to move in this direction, the publication of Christopher Nealon’s *The Matter of Capital* in 2011 now anchors research on the relation between poetry and capital. By focusing on the valences of historical capitalism, Ronda, Bernes, and Milne necessarily draw attention to a large crowd of poets. They rarely tie their chapters to a single poet and instead move diagonally between poets who illuminate facets of capitalism. On the cusp of the second quarter of the twenty-first century, a hundred years away from US and British high modernism, accounts of the post-1945 period form a solid corpus. Professional organizations such as the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present and Post45 have well-established journals and annual meetings. Postmodernism is somewhat less likely to appear as a periodizing term than post-Fordism, deindustrialization, and the Anthropocene. Ronda, Bernes, and Milne offer three different accounts of poetry read in light of US-driven global capitalism. Telling the story of the post-1945 period, Ronda, Bernes, and Milne narrow their focus to one theoretical spoke. In Ronda’s *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature’s End* (2018), climate change takes the foreground. Bernes’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017) brings labor to the center of his analysis. In *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics* (2018), Milne tracks the poetics of materialist feminism under neoliberalism. Together, the three books establish a periodizing narrative of considerable complexity through close analysis of poetic texts.

It is widely recognized that the US-led globalization of the economy entered a new phase in the early 1970s. The economic features of the early 1970s include the end of the Bretton Woods regime and the dollar’s tie to gold, the invention of pricing models for financial options, the explosion of a national economy reliant on consumer debt, and, in general, the shift from production to circulation. The subprime housing crisis of 2007–2008; the global resistance movements, revolutions, and occupations of 2010–2011; and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 are episodes in the
decades-long “ascendancy of finance” (Vogl). But scholars have only begun to tell the story of contemporary poetry in light of what Giovanni Arrighi identifies as one of several historical terminal crises of capital accumulation, or what Robert Brenner names the long downtown. Ronda, Bernes, and Milne together make the case that we can see these changes in text-based poetry written in the Global North. The immiseration and exploitation of racial capitalism play out within the US and Canada in forms that fundamentally shape the composition of poetic texts of many kinds. While Ronda and Bernes begin their books a little earlier than Milne, all three make the 1970s a crucial starting point for the changes they track.

To some extent, the focus on work, materialist feminism, and climate shapes the form not only of the poems under consideration but also of the monographs themselves. Pivotal readings of poetry in black studies, from Moten’s *In the Break* (2003) through Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* (2016), have required a lyrical style suited to the revolutionary urgency of criticism and the lives at stake in the thinking. The stylistic beauties, riffs, cries, and testimonies of these books, fully congruent with the unfolding of their close readings of poetry, constitute an intervention for studies of poetry in general, one that has yet to be recognized fully. The stylistic elements of these books by Ronda, Bernes, and Milne are not at all so pronounced, but their work nevertheless pushes against expectations for what poetry criticism might look like.

Milne’s *Poetry Matters* radiates outward in an expansive arc. Her book encompasses nearly a dozen different women poets, writing in the US and Canada. From considerations of the material body in poets from Jennifer Scappettone to Nikki Reimer, she moves to the transcorporeal and the posthuman in work by Yedda Morrison, Marcella Durand, Rita Wong, and Evelyn Reilly. Her third section—which comprises poetry by Juliana Spahr, Claudia Rankine, Dionne Brand, Rachel Zolf, Jena Osman, and Jen Benka—stretches toward the global horizons of contemporary poetry by engaging poems that resist resurgent nationalisms. A chapter on poets who write about the murders of Indigenous women in Canada and the lack of acknowledgment from the state is followed by a chapter on poets who take apart the US Constitution, exposing its effacement of the humanity of women and African Americans. The succession of chapters makes sense because the book is tied neither to interventions within canonical poets, nor to a “show-and-tell” of unknown poets, but to a strong argument about conceptual and experimental poetry as it develops in tandem with political and economic forms of oppression and violence. Beyond the heterogeneous group of women poets she reads, the signature quality of Milne’s work lies
in the organic style of her criticism, in which each chapter extends and complicates the framework of the previous.

I start with Milne, because the conclusions she draws about why poetry “matters” help set the stage for slightly more qualified arguments launched by Ronda and Bernes. Near the end of her book, Milne looks back over the concerns of the six chapters and writes:

A poetics that explores the political dimensions of affect; demonstrates an understanding of subjectivity as posthuman and transcorporeal; critically reflects on the impact of capitalism on queer, racialized, female, disabled, and non-normative bodies; and develops an ethical vocabulary for reimagining the nation-state and critically engaging with issues of democracy and citizenship is now more urgent than ever. (239–40)

The verbs Milne deploys here (explores, demonstrates, reflects, and develops) and the concepts she develops throughout her book (affect, subjectivity, material bodies, ethical vocabularies) are the meeting places for politics and aesthetics. While none of these concepts is entirely unique to poetry, it is nevertheless true that poems are crucibles for the charging of affect, the expression of subjectivity, and, perhaps more subtly, the critical examination of ethical vocabulary.

The historical sweep of each book affects the kind of argument it makes for the strength of poetry’s political engagement. Milne’s book covers a clearly demarcated historical period, the last 15 years or so, although her introduction uncovers the crucial influence of the feminist poetics forged in the 1980s in the Canadian journal Tessera and the US journal HOW(ever). Ronda and Bernes opt for a longer historical narrative over which they elaborate their theories of how poetry registers climate change and labor. Both begin with poets of the 1940s and 1950s: for Bernes, Frank O’Hara; for Ronda, Lorine Niedecker and Gwendolyn Brooks. Their arguments then trace bright, fluorescent lines from the postwar period to the current crises. Like Milne, however, Ronda and Bernes avoid a facile determinism or symptomatic criticism, explaining the linked development of US poetry and economic conditions.

In The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization, Bernes’s particular topic is labor and the shift from an economy based on manufacturing and production to one based on services. The poets he surveys, ranging from O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Hannah Weiner to Bernadette Mayer, Sean Bonney, and Moten, illuminate different aspects of the restructuring of the workplace. There are two prongs to Bernes’s argument. First, he shows how work shapes the
features and forms of poetry, from O’Hara’s flânerie to Mayer’s “destruction of the line” in *Memory* (1976) (137). As the historically differentiated spheres of art and labor merge and overlap, poetry can be understood by examining “the transformation of the kinds of things people do for work—a shift from an industrial, manufacturing-oriented economy to a postindustrial economy oriented around administrative, technical, clerical, and service work” (19). The point here is that poetry cannot help being “about” work, because work, and the way it transforms human social relations, defines what life is under capitalism.

But developments in poetry and art, Bernes argues, also feed reciprocally into these transformations in the workplace, as “aspects of the artistic critique, such as the critique of work from the standpoint of participation, became essential parts of the restructuring undertaken by capitalists to improve profitability” (17). The critique of labor, which, Bernes shows through nuanced close readings, is mounted by artists and poets, provides “coordinates, ideas, and images” for “new regimes of mutability and circulation” (18). The second part of Bernes’s argument lays a greater burden on a book primarily about poetry, but is nevertheless deftly supported—for instance, in a transformative reading of free indirect discourse and Ashbery’s *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) (76).

At stake in these two books is not so much a question about “what poetry is”—Milne and Bernes have a catholic taste that helps them assemble fresh juxtapositions of poets—as it is a question about the position of poetry as outside or apart from capitalism. For Milne, a twenty-first-century feminist poetics “can advance complex forms of critique not just at the level of content, but also through its form and compositional strategy” (5). Bernes’s thesis leads him to the qualified conclusion that art, having become “one technique of communication or management among many,” may no longer be able to offer “credible challenges to the status quo” (156). The response might be to turn from a poetics of labor to a poetics of “unwork” and wagelessness (184). With their acute sensitivity to poetic form and their profound grasp of historical capitalism as filtered through their chosen sites of the gendered body and the workplace, Milne and Bernes avoid reductively optimistic or pessimistic claims about either poetry’s total immunity or its total complicity.

Ronda’s *Remainders* narrates the environmental crises produced by capitalist growth by turning to poetic figures and genres from the 1950s to the 2000s. *Remainders* begins by acknowledging the unpropitious status of poetry as a form of explicit engagement:

Resisting a perspective of innocence or ethical outrage that would suggest an observational, distanced vantage, these poems
emphasize forms of complicity in environmental destruction and convey collective feelings of vulnerability, hopelessness, and dread. They replace jeremiads of imminent apocalypse with an uncanny sense of living on amidst accumulating planetary disruption, and they mourn the loss of a belief in nature’s rejuvenating powers. (6)

Instead of pitching poetry as an ethical, hortatory discourse similar to the work of climate scientists and journalists, Ronda stresses poetry’s rhetorical divergences. These differences include its “enigmatic, refractory ecological imaginaries” and its “speculative turns toward imagined futures and recursive engagement with prior modes” (5). Ronda isolates the thematic elements of poems written during the Great Acceleration, when nature no longer appears external and inexhaustible, but relatively indistinct from human activity and damaged beyond renewal. Her key rhetorical move is to analyze these poems as “remainders” themselves. In a time of the “progressive diminishment of poetry’s cultural authority” (14), poetry’s own marginality makes it one of the cultural forms that can “tarry with what lives on and what is beyond repair” (5).

Playing with this dual definition of her conceptual term, Ronda looks for poems that address “what happens when the figurative potential for natural renewal or refuge becomes no longer possible” (11). This question leads her to an eclectic series of poets from Niedecker and Brooks to Gary Snyder and Diane di Prima to Cheena Marie Lo. A natural and historical approach to the physical environment and the histories of genre and trope (elegy, apostrophe) grounds each chapter. In Ronda’s adroit readings, Niedecker is a poet of concrete things—strawberries and waterways—which are also emblems of frontier settlement and of agricultural runoff (23, 28). Ashbery’s frequent references to “air” open into a consideration of the diffuse perspective of ecological consciousness in the 1970s (47). The catalogued remains of houses in Lo’s poems about Hurricane Katrina resist narratives of repair and recovery, drawing attention instead to the “less redemptive history” of state-sponsored racism (131). Ronda draws from individual poems a set of affects that feel familiar once they emerge in poetic guise. The poets of Remainders translate the present, giving names to inchoate feelings and sometimes contradictory states of mind: “unlocalizable anxieties” (48), “naïve” re-orderings of society (70), “estranged recognition” (114), and the “sense of an unbearable responsibility that must somehow be borne” (128). Twentieth-century and contemporary US poets, Ronda shows, have a vivid sense of the human predicament and the consequences of anthropogenic climate change,
which they register and route through the remainders of poetic traditions.

Milne, Bernes, and Ronda raise concerns about the gendered body, labor, and the climate that they present as both external and internal to the literary history of poetry. Accounts of US poetry historically stress narratives of influence in which poets respond to earlier poets, either consciously or through the mediation of inherited forms. As a result, poetic criticism can feel like a game of erudition, education, and luck. One explanation for poetry’s cultural marginalization has nothing to do with poetry itself, but rather with a discourse about poetry that struggles to consider the material conditions of racial capitalism, ableism, and misogyny in which poets write and live. Poetic figures or genres have often been abstracted from the historical conditions of their emergence. Perhaps less often, poetic figures and genres have been mistreated in the opposite direction, with facile readings of their determination by these conditions. Milne, Bernes, and Ronda lead readers through extended, difficult, and detailed readings of literary texts, but they attach these readings to intuitive research questions about poetry’s place in the world. Their arguments for the agency, the efficacy, or the uses of poetry follow from their shared commitment to avoid treating poetry as either a symptom or a solution.

Notes


**Works Cited**


